



## NEW JERSEY REFERENCE NEWARK LIBRARY

### A GREAT PARK

Parks are the chief adornment of our great cities. We offer this theme of parks. It has been true said that only by means of parks can we view the city.

For that reason we instinctively first turn to parks bordered by high buildings, certainly one of the more dramatic spectacles of urban America. We think of Chicago's Grant and Lincoln Parks, both bordered on two sides by skyscrapers, and, of course, New York's Central Park, which owes so much to its surrounding wall of masonry. In those instances, the frame has become, over the years, almost as important as the design.

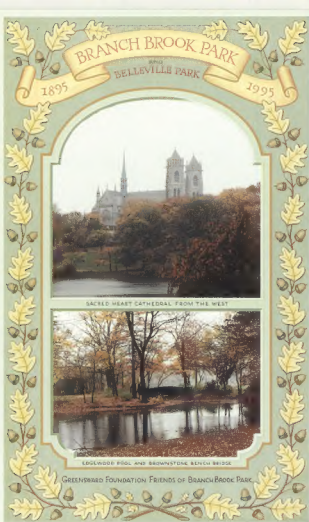
When the skyscrapers and the massive masonry walls are absent, however, we focus solely on the parks; there is no striking drama of contrast. Such a condition imposes itself on the city-county park systems everywhere. For today's observer, it is the location of those parks and their design, without drama, which make them stand out. They remain the bright ornaments, at times unnoticed, in the urban fabric. Such is the example of the Essex County Park System, with one park that commands admiration and delight above all, Branch Brook Park in Newark. Here is the city's great oasis, which quietly takes its place among the country's best.



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THE JOSEPH DEALESSANDRO FAMILY





## BRANCH BROOK PARK

The First County Park in America

Newark's Branch Brook Park, like Central Park in New York, is wholly man-made. To be sure, there are woods at the northern end, but for the rest of the park a lake, ponds, meadows and streams had to be created, and trees and shrubs planted. New York had begun its Central Park as early as 1858, Branch Brook's Prospect Park in 1866, and in 1868 their designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, had even submitted a plan for a "Central Park for Newark."

While every passing year saw the growth in the new industrial city that doubled its population every twenty-five years to reach 181,830 by 1890, and Essex County reached 356,098, the vision of a great park waited until the last decade of the century. Then, the greatest of American fairs suddenly arose on the shores of Lake Michigan, the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. From this temporary world of plaster and wood created in Chicago came the City Beautiful Movement. The Exposition's influence was astonishing, ranging from the Columbia University campus in New York to the McMillan Plan of 1901 that transformed Washington into the classical capital we know today.

The leaders of Newark and the surrounding communities now raised their sights beyond their borders. If they were to have a proper park system it would be at the county and not the municipal level. To that end, the New Jersey State Legislature passed enabling legislation in 1894 creating the county park commission for Essex County, the first of its kind in the country. Temporary at first, the Essex County Park Commission became

permanent in 1895. Its aegis would extend from Branch Brook Park to South Mountain Reservation.

From the start Branch Brook Park would be the jewel in the system's crown. Yet it can be asked: What prompted the commissioners to select a site for a park along the old Morris Canal built in the 1830s? At the south end was the First River going east with a northern tributary, Branch Brook. Abandoned brownstone quarries and the Blue Jay Swamp claimed much of the site. A stretch of the Morris Canal ran along the western flank linking the Hudson and Delaware Rivers. That the land had little commercial value was excuse enough, but what weighed with the commissioners was the presence of a city reservoir much as it did in the instance of New York's Central Park. Built in 1871 by the Newark Aqueduct Board, the circular reservoir with land around it, 40 acres in all, was turned over to the new commission. Today, the new skating rink is on the bed of the old reservoir.

In April 1895, a month after the Commission had been made permanent, Essex County voted a \$2,500,000 bond issue for purchasing and developing the park sites. In July 1895 the Aqueduct Board gave the reservoir with its 60 acres to the commission, and this was supplemented by 52 acres from individuals, including 31 acres from the Ballantine family, brewers of the city's famous ale.

The Commission at first retained the firm of John Bogart and Nathan F. Barrett to produce a preliminary plan for the Branch Brook Park. The design of the two handsome bridges of cut stone, and, later, the gatehouses at the Ballantine Parkway and Lake Street, the Commission engaged John Mervin Carrère and Thomas Hastings, future architects of the famed City Hall in Paterson, New Jersey, the old Senate and House office buildings near the United States Capitol, and the New York Public Library.

The Commission did not implement the initial plan. Instead, it turned to John Charles Olmsted, nephew and



View of Branch Brook Lake looking north, Midlake Bridge by Carrère & Hastings in the distance.

stepson of Frederick Law Olmsted. Already in 1894 the commissioners had asked him to survey existing parks and possible park sites in the county. That they should do so was hardly surprising since the Olmsted firm had, by the 1890s, reached the eminence in the landscape profession where it would remain until the 1930s. At the time Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. had been at work laying out the grounds of Biltmore, George W. Vanderbilt's estate at Asheville, North Carolina, and was chief landscape architect of the World's Columbian Exposition. In 1894 the firm was known as Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, the new partners being John Charles Olmsted and Charles Eliot, son of Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard. It was John Charles who met with the commissioners.

So much is made today of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. that all others have been left in his shadow with the consequence that little attention has been given John Charles. Born in 1852, he was the son of Dr. John Hull

Progress Administration (WPA) workers, its bed was paved with Belgian blocks.

In springtime the gorge is at its most splendid color. (It is here each year that the 10 kilometer race sets off.) The dogwood, forsythia, azalea, mountain laurel and rhododendron are in blossom with the cherry trees, and transform the Extension into one of the great floral displays in America.

The Essex County Park System is one of the more diverse of the region. It ranges from Independence Park, 13 acres of active recreation, to South Mountain Reservation, over 2000 acres, which boasts a zoo. In this varied mosaic of greenery, Branch Brook Park takes its place as an outstanding example of the picturesque landscape. The park is inspiring. Its reward is in its sense of calm and repose. With these assets, Essex County has one of the finest park systems in the country.

HENRY HOPE REED

Branch Brook Lake in winter.



Olmsted who died when John Charles was five years old. Two years later his mother married Frederick Law, his father's younger brother. In 1875 on graduating from Sheffield Scientific School, part of Yale University, he joined his stepfather's firm where he learned the art of landscaping, meanwhile studying architecture with Thomas Wisedell, the architect who was his stepfather's associate in the design of the grounds and terrace of the United States Capitol. Shortly thereafter he held a financial interest in the firm and, in 1884, on the firm's moving from New York to Brookline, Massachusetts, he became a full partner in F. L. & J. C. Olmsted, later, Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot. On the latter's death and the elder Olmsted's retirement he teamed with his half-brother, Frederick Law, Jr. and the firm became Olmsted Brothers.

Their success was extraordinary. Until John Charles's death in 1920, the number of their landscape commissions amounted to over a thousand, public and private, of which 250 were for parks. Of these, the Essex County Park System, obtained in 1898, was one of the more extensive.

That John Charles Olmsted is not better known is simply due to his general reticence compared to his stepfather. Where the latter's papers fill several shelves in the Library of Congress, the former's are rare; his writings are subsumed in the many reports of the firm.

The 1901 report of Olmsted Brothers with its plan for Branch Brook Park can be safely credited to John Charles. He dealt directly with the Commission in this instance and made specific recommendations. He saw no need to extend mounds, or berms, on the periphery to keep out the sights and sounds of the city, as in Prospect Park. Trees and shrubs would suffice to that end. Nor was the whole park to be country-like or picturesque. He felt the Southern Reservation, cut off on the north by the Park Avenue Bridge and its approaches, would need masses of shrubbery and flowers since it would be the most popular part of the park. For this reason he adopted formal

## GREENSWARD FOUNDATION PUBLICATIONS

*Prospect Park Handbook*, Clay Lancaster, 1967, Third Edition, 1988

*Tree Trails in Central Park*, M.M. Graff, 1970

*Rock Trails in Central Park*, Thomas Hanley and M.M. Graff, 1976

*The Men Who Made Central Park*, M.M. Graff, 1982

*Central Park/Prospect Park, A New Perspective*, M.M. Graff, 1985

*Rockefeller New York. A Tour by Henry Hope Reed*, Photographs by Esther Bubley, 1988

*Bridges of Central Park*, Henry Hope Reed, Robert M. McGee and Esther Mipass, 1990

*Map of Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden*, George Colbert and Guenter Vollaht, Second Edition, 1990

*Map of Central Park*, George Colbert and Guenter Vollaht, 1994



Fields of grass, trees and water, Southern Division.

bedding as suggested in the Bogart-Barrett scheme for the east side of Branch Brook Lake. He sensed that the public would be more interested in formal ritual displays than in woods and pasture. Opposite, on the lake's west side, he placed a terrace in order to view the formal garden. Although the formal garden later gave way to an English garden, with bulbs and annuals scattered in turf, the terrace remains, now decorated with stone lions from the old Prudential Insurance Building in Newark. It is from this terrace that the visitor obtains one of the most rewarding views beyond the park, the twin towers of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart rising above the trees. This remarkable view inevitably recalls the ancient cathedrals of Europe.

As often in an Olmsted park, water, still and flowing, abounds. A necklace of pools from Branch Brook Lake is strung north along a stream to end in a pool near the greenhouses at Heller Parkway. North of Bloomfield Avenue where the park narrows to 200 yards, water is lost in a clump of woods. Here the stream is crossed by small

picturesque bridges made of boulders and cut stone. Beyond the woods are open fields and meadows. Other than its waters, the special combination of field and wood, with carefully spaced trees setting off a carpet of turf, constitutes the most pleasing visual impact to the park stroller.

When the park was built there was no problem of water supply. The Morris Canal, one of the park's early curiosities, assured a high water table. Opened in 1831, the canal ran from Jersey City to Newark turning north to Paterson, west to Lake Hopatcong, continuing south to Phillipsburg on the Delaware River across from Easton, Pennsylvania. It was one of several canals in this part of the country that brought anthracite coal from the Pennsylvania mines to New York Harbor. Much as the nearby Passaic River was used, the canal was the waterway to transport brownstone from quarries formerly in and around the park site. To the north in what is now Belleville Park, a sunken baseball field identifies the location of what was one of the many sources of "Belleville Freestone," a trade name for the brownstone still seen

Sacred Heart Cathedral.



Second River in cherry blossom season.

along streets of Newark and elsewhere in the metropolitan region. In use until 1924, the canal was finally drained and Newark's subway, constructed along its bed a decade later, came into full operation in 1937. One unexpected consequence of the canal's abandonment was a drop in the park's water table. To make up for the loss of seepage from the canal, in 1925 an electric pump was installed in a well near the greenhouses at Heller Parkway.

The park was considerably enlarged in 1924 by the purchase of what is known as the Extension, approximately 84 acres of open land north of Heller Parkway. This linked Branch Brook Park with Belleville Park's 32 acres giving the overall parkland about 400 continuous acres. Part of the Extension was used for active recreation, but most of it, a gorge along the Second River, was adorned with flowering trees and shrubs. Large varieties of Japanese cherry trees donated by Caroline Hammerberg Field of Newark's well-known merchant family were planted here in 1927. In the 1930s the Second River was given concrete walls and, with the help of Works